

I. Good-Bye Wisconsin

To Mrs. Walter Weil

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HOMeward bound at last, north from Milwaukee on Christmas Eve. The red-towered station looks very German. But the stern, tattered, tall twilight is American; little by little it will change the German faces; and all that in the near future we can hope for, or fear, is resemblance. There used to be a saintly Scotchwoman in the waiting room to keep country girls from getting into trouble. In the train-shed the crowd surges against a high picket fence, sways in one piece like a boxcarful of cattle: a mixed population, returning to maternal arms, infant arms, arms in love. As the train moves north a blizzard comes south.

My life of the rest of the year being left behind, being buried beneath new impressions, trampled underfoot by resurrected

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ones, passing through and out of my head, bit by bit . . . The stiff carnations of the Mediterranean are in bloom. Never live in Paris: everyone there has done some harm to everyone else; the heart must be kept in fashion, there was the influence of Henry James, so it is no longer elegant to quarrel; they go on dining together, a malicious intimacy with a lump in its throat. In mid-Atlantic, a short rainbow alongside of the ship with both feet in the sea. Never live in New York either: a town in which "it is as essential to wear one's heart on one's sleeve as one's tongue in one's cheek." New York is halfway between the south of France and Wisconsin, always halfway between any two such places; that is its importance . . .

The train jerks, because the cars are of steel, I suppose. Oranges and green plush. The heat of a Turkish bath into which, through opening doors, through double windowpanes, the awful wind penetrates; nature and a comfort-loving race between them

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have made this the worst climate in the world. Somewhere up ahead everyone's Christmas tree, squat and dazzling.

A wild-looking youngster asks if anyone has seen his wife and baby. An old man watches over a girl as lovely as a film star. She wears in her hat a tied ostrich plume which looks as if long tresses of hair had grown on a stem; no other woman in the car is unfashionably dressed. She is a half-wit, and keeps eating sandwiches with the impressive ferocity of a monkey, clutching them with both hands. Here and there, students on their way home from college. Middle-class young men in France are less fine physically. Heads almost uniformly well-proportioned; the relaxed look that experts in dissimulation have when they are alone. Either they are blush-pink or they have that translucent dead-leaf skin, without yellowness, without whiteness, which seems peculiar to America and is said to be increasingly common, a result of American air, of the way of

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life and the climate. The mad girl has it, too.

Throbbing on the rails, the train begins running downhill, which means, I remember from childhood, that we have passed a town called Marblehead. That name and the mature schoolboys make me think of Greece—many-headed, marble-headed. France is its heir, eldest son in this generation of nations. I am jealous of every national glory. Not that I expect my country to become a poets' colony, a sculptors', architects', and moralists' colony. There were all sorts of Greeks . . . Heads of all complexions, even in the sculptured stone: ruddy and ivory and the very vivid brown—as if red rose-leaves had been tanned and made into a leather—which some of my friends, visiting the Mediterranean beaches, find objectionable and others do their best to acquire.

I have to change trains. The snowstorm is over, or we have passed through it. I share a corner of what is called a milk-train with

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a lot of baggage and two young workmen. One seems unhealthy: large hands bright with chemicals. The other has that look of sheepish melancholy which I frivolously associate with socialism. They engage in conversation about their jobs and each other's relatives which they know by name; their fathers are farmers; the yellow-handed one works in a tannery in Fond du Lac, the other is an ironworker in a Milwaukee foundry. They speak a mixture of several kinds of English—Swedish, German, Polish, Irish—immigrants' children of the second generation having inherited accents from all their parents at once, all the accents. They keep looking at my cigarette-lighter, my gloves, my tight black cap, a Basque *beret*.

The tanner: "Where d'ya work in Milwaukee?"

"I came up from Chicago."

"Yuh got some folks here?"

"My father and mother live in Claron. He was a farmer until he moved to town."

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A pause, without embarrassment on their parts. The ironworker: "Wha' d'ya work at'n Chicago?"

"I don't work in Chicago. I've been in New York." I see myself retreating right round the world . . .

So I offer them cigarettes; they look at the mark; and out of timidity I open Thomas Mann's *Hochstapler Krull*. If this were Europe I could have told them that I was a writer, which would have been the end of it. One day years ago when I was wearing a rather pretentious black cape, I tipped a porter in a Munich railway station. "Thank you kindly, Herr poet," he said.

The train is making up for lost time. I know, I say to myself, what the country is like beyond the syncopated noise, the shaken light-bulbs, outside the sooty windows in the dark. The state with a beautiful name—glaciers once having made of it their pasture—is an anthology, a collection of all the kinds of landscape, perfect examples side by

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side. Ranges of hills strung from the great lake to the Mississippi River in long, lustrous necklaces, one above another from the northern throat of the state until well below its waist. Peacock lakes of bronze weeds and vivid water, with steep shores; four or five of them to be seen at a time from certain hill-tops. Fertility and wilderness in rapid succession along powdery highways: classic meadows where the cattle seem to walk and eat in their sleep, sandy slopes full of foxes, ledges where there are still rattlesnakes. Sad forests full of springs; the springs have a feverish breath. There are metallic plants which burn your hands if you touch them. All summer the horizon trembles, hypnotically flickering over the full grain, the taffeta corn, and the labor in them of dark, over-clothed men, singing women, awe-stricken children. These say nothing; their motionless jaws give an account of their self-pity, dignity, and endurance. Sheet-lightning at night, and they sleep in the grass, in ham-

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mocks, on folded blankets on the floor—the beds are too hot. They get up and work with strange, ardent motions and the obstinacies of ghosts in the heat; there is wealth in it. In the sky mocking marble palaces, an Eldorado of sterile cloud. Not sterile—for down fall large black-and-blue rains, tied with electric ribbons; they never seem to be doing much good, but the crops are saved . . .

Thus, neglecting the masterpiece which I keep in my hand to prevent the workmen from asking questions but not uninfluenced by its mood of shameless, summery confession—in which the true nature of Herr Krull is almost obscured by the bright light shed on every detail—I think of the land outside the train window as one of perpetual summer. Then the door swings open; the blown cold pounds on the nape of my neck; in spite of the coal-gas, the tobacco, the oranges, the opium-sweetness of warm bodies, I imagine that I can smell snow.

For in reality this is a sort of winter resort

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for storms from the North Pole; now all the half-tropic vegetation, the flesh and the fruitfulness, stripped and lying quite still, are theirs. You seem to be on a lofty plateau, and you can see with your own eyes that the world is convex. The villages are almost as lonely as the farms. It is like Russia with vodka prohibited and no stationary peasantry—strictly speaking, with none at all. The soul hibernates in the cold body; your feet ache for months at a time. I remember, at church, in my childhood, prayers that were visible, white and tenuous, and moustaches covered with frost through which the slow, discouraging hymn made its way. A good many men get drunk a great deal of the time in spite of everything. Once a month the new moon sets out like the crooked knife of a fairy story in search of a heart to bury itself in. This is the dying-season for old men and women. When the moon is full, over the crusted snow, men go rabbit-hunting. . . .

The train stops at a junction and makes its

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presence known; with another lowing, female sound, another train replies. I have a vague remembrance of that junction, those two deep voices. I ask, and am told that we are coming into Claron.

Out of the dark run forward my young father, my small mother. Across the town in an automobile, no distance at all; home, the new house, a home in a town. On the small square of property close-pressed by other houses, collies with no more herds to tend; the color of pheasants with ruffled plumage, under the arc-light, against the snow-banks. Up the icy steps; a tumult in the doorway; energetic kisses which smell good, smell of health and warm wool; my brother, my sisters. Their courtesy a little affected but with burning eyes, breaking down repeatedly in the stress of the exuberance which they have in common, the stress of joy or disappointment, pride, contention, yearning. This is the wild fountain of friendliness. Sometimes it occurs to me that

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I ought to play the Ancient Mariner, but I am evidently always to be wedding guest.

There are chocolates and fruit; I remember the annual basket of grapes which my father used to bring from the state fair when we were children, a wooden basket with a wire handle and pale, elongated California grapes—each of us ate his share grape by grape, there were so few. The floors are waxed; carpets like everyone else's have taken the place of the rag rugs accumulated by my grandmothers. That fruitful, severe farmhouse of childhood, it seemed to have an immortal soul and now seems to have borne a physical resemblance to my mother—a house so cold at this time of the year that every vessel which held water had a lip of crystal. Here there is a bathroom. Progress, I think sleepily. The king is dead, long live the king; deprivation is dead. . . . I rejoice, but regret some of his poetry. Fortunately, progress has not gone far enough here to deprive me of a cold bed, of the drug

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of zero weather, the barbaric luxury of frost, in my nostrils all night long.

Early in the morning I go out to look at the town. It is like any other not too new or too large or too small in the state—or perhaps in any state not too far east or west. Main Street down the middle—beef-red brick and faded clapboards; it is lamentably impressive. The new banks, I must admit, are of lighter brick and adorned with brief, reasonably Roman pillars. The churches have an
< atheistic look and must have been very cheap to build. Dry-goods stores remarkably full of luxury; drug stores which sell everything (at a glance everything seems made of paper)
< the most expensive cameras and the cheapest books; a windowful of superb apples. Apples are wealth in midwinter; in fact it is all wealth, though it resembles the meanest poverty. Branching off Main Street at right angles, up small hills and down gentle slopes, the other streets: short but spacious avenues, noble trees over the snowbanks, lawns under

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them. Actually it is one lawn, there being no hedges or fences or walls (during the burning summers, no privacy). The houses are variations on one house, a sort of palatial cottage; principally wood, you can see into most of them and through some, and they do not seem to rest solidly on the ground; the difference between them and a tent is precisely that between moving every generation and moving every month . . .

Where the houses leave off lugubrious poetry begins: never-painted landscape, chiaroscuro of twigs and snow. Framed by a puerile architecture, a patchwork of advertisements, a frieze of restless and almost beautiful men and women. The country, there it lies, a fitful and mysterious source—nothing more. The source of the sunrises, the bad weather, and the food, and of certain books already a little out of date. For the country, in the old sense of the word, has ceased to exist. Wisconsin farmers are no longer rustics; they have become provincials. >

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The former ardent, hungry, tongue-tied life with its mingling of Greek tragedy and idyll has come to an end. Labor for the men, labor-pains for the women, elementary passions like gusts of storm moving unembarrassed in empty hearts, strong minds empty from birth until death of everything but the images of fowls in the rain, lonesome barns in the yellow sunshine—all over and done with. Now, by telephones, the radio, and automobiles, the farms have been turned into a sort of spacious, uncrystallized suburb around towns like Claron; and between the town and the suburb the contact is close. Now hired men, for example, have the privilege of being in love with Miss Garbo, whose troubling face I find on a bright poster.

Here are the humble-looking churches, half of whose faithful are farmers; many variations, both in appearance and in doctrine, on one church. I attend an elaborate pageant of the Nativity. All of the congregation's tapestries and many of its best bed-

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sheets; rented crowns and curtains, silly angels painted on a backdrop of sky; footlights and spotlights worthy of an assembly of radio fans. A gaunt little girl in gilt and muslin represents the Angel of History; she plays theatrically, has a very modern body and a cropped honey-colored head, and even her solemnity suggests profane shows in the East. Other all too Western muses. An adolescent chokes on his words, as indeed the original shepherd probably did. One of the Wise Men has forgotten to take off his horn-rimmed spectacles. The Babe in the manger is electricity, which is moving and seems true. It is all moving and true. But as the collection-boxes on long handles are passed, rather too plaintive an appeal for generosity is made; one would suppose that there were niggardly church-goers. And a kindly deacon improvises this prayer:

“Dear Father, we thank Thee that we live in a day when men are given to enjoy many things that they never had before. Espe-

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cially women—I think women's lives have been made easy and lifted out of the darkness, thanks to the right interpretation of Thy Scriptures. And dear Father, we hear at present a great deal of talk against Thy church. It has its limitations, we know, but it has done a wonderful work for mankind. And what have they found to take its place? Until another institution comes along which can do that work better, let us be faithful to it. Bless us in the name of the Son who, as we have seen, was born unto us this day. Amen." I realize that it is not blasphemous, for it is only rhetorically addressed to God, not meant to be heard in heaven but overheard in this town. Thus the religion of Calvin, holding its own in society at all costs, is helping itself cease to be a religion at all, the little churches becoming—oh, let us say, clubs.

There is a denominational college. I imagine the president of a poor school as a solicitor, a beggar of bequests, moving with

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anxious sociability from deathbed to deathbed, an advertiser by word of mouth, a human form-letter, praising his institution and arousing pity for it at the same time. Scandal—an indecorous dance or sometimes any dance at all, an instructor whose opinions on any subject are foolhardy or whose private life is subject to any remark—may occasion an unpleasant talk with some elderly person who has already been generous, relatively generous, or even cause a will to be revised. He has another source of revenue to keep flowing: the tuition fees, which are high. The young people are lawless, effervescent with strong ideas, insidiously persuasive; if his puritanism is tyrannical or the curriculum behind the times, friendly fathers, impatient brothers, will let them go elsewhere or try to have him removed. It is an unhappy position; he must be nobly patient and politic. . . . At all events, the college reflects some such mournful reasonableness, time-serving, and trembling.

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There are fraternity houses. A black upright piano rather broken by jazz and loaded with sheets of it, a phonograph as large as a pulpit, a radio-set which resembles a diamond-shaped harp—these things at least represent an art, humbly. A shout up the staircase brings the “brothers” down, single file, like jurymen. Most of them are solid and rubicund, one or two slender ones with the dead-leaf complexion: men and large men at that, but they have the blushes, the look of haunted innocence of small boys. Handsome, as a group compared with other groups; the individual faces seem too fresh and too amiable. Republican principles, false-looking gestures of affection, more than one hand laid deliberately on the next shoulder, expert joking evidently meant to create an atmosphere of intimacy: these habits will be useful in later life if they are to be, for example, travelling salesmen or ward politicians. No sign of thoroughgoing candor; almost every speech is followed by an acute

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glance at someone, to see how it is being taken; each is playing up to the other. Uniformly young though of various ages, the embryo without any mature bias; not a single novice doctor or lawyer or journalist or mathematician; how are they going to choose their professions? They will have to follow their noses—nothing else here to follow. The chief work of the society, I learn, is to beat out of each other all conceit and incivility; what is exceptional passes for the former, what is undemocratic for the latter. The better part of genius, if any turned up here, would be discretion. Its chief amusement is the exchange of indecent anecdotes in half-official conclave; an aimless exchange, for watch is kept and any moral slackness, however lonely, punished with a sort of paddle. Apparently a boy who procured, for instance, an unexpurgated *Arabian Nights* could make his way through school by selling it page by page. But the paddle occupies a place of honor on a hook on the wall, under a

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photograph of the Venus de Milo. How, with this combination of mental saturnalia and friendly *auto-da-fé*, are they to learn even to choose wives? Choosing, as a human function, does not seem to be greatly favored . . .

And what of sensual pleasure (call it love) in this town? Out of sight, fraught with dangers up to a certain age, subject to ridicule or worse thereafter. Boyish passion, that of Daphnis and Cherubino alike—its joys are restricted to Latin countries; its pains flourish anywhere. Women who live alone, in these translucent houses, are easily chaperoned by their neighbors; most people never hear of adultery except when there is a murder trial; there are only one or two charmless loose women, who fulfil their destiny, furthermore, under a cloud of specific suspicions; which leaves, for the vicious or the exasperated, girls of the poorest families, hired girls: obscure nights in motor-cars which are like rudderless boats, a handful of

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touches, farewells charged with resentment, finally an unpleasant reputation among other men. Americans like what is public, feel cheated by what some other races especially enjoy, the illicit; they dislike obliging their relatives to defend them; they dislike danger. To the young man with ambition enough to matter, premature marriage is the worst of dangers. It means earning a living by whatever is at hand; beggars of jobs cannot experiment, ought not to be far-sighted or fastidious. It means Wisconsin forever, with never any wholesome dissipation of a thousand chimeras—travels, ambitions, curiosities. That illusions should come to grief is the first step toward contentment; early marriage keeps as many hopes as are left intact, embalms them in a safe irreality, and keeps the young husband too young at heart. And almost any girl may spring, under the feet of a beau who suits her, any sort of man-trap. In general the young men mind this danger as well as the others. But fright is a strong

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stimulant; after dark there is a vibrant atmosphere of pleasure—worried, adored, and left to its meager resources. Fever takes the wheel of the autos. In the round of sufficient amusements, a more or less alert suspicion of their sweethearts and themselves; they must keep their self-control, must keep their bodies safe and sound, must keep from proposing. Under the soft maples, nervous teasing and erotic songs whistled and shrubs jetting their moist flowers and a lump in every throat. Syncopated bewilderment on the dance-floors; the music melts their hands and knees, but nothing is any easier. In the motion-picture theaters, thanks to the disastrous and vacillating ease in Miss Garbo's face—more fever.

A modest theater, shaped like a garage; but it is the imagination's chapel in this town, the small temple dedicated to licentiousness, aspiration, ideals. On the brick wall, on easels on the sidewalk, samples of what it has to offer: the abnormally large and liquid eyes

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of a beauty; the ridicule and pity of ill-fitting shoes; distant crystal and iron seas; foreign luxury, fashion shows, garden parties white with diamonds and swans. Every plot is founded on restlessness and good luck; every film is a documentary film, fantastic only in relation to its subject—realistically true to the imaginations to which it is addressed. There they all flock to see, not really a world brought to their door, but themselves in every foreign and domestic disguise; themselves as they might be, convincingly photographed where they are not—the variable bodies of other Narcissuses on other mesmerizing streams. And in the dark and pleasant silence, unreasonable music smooths their troubled foreheads. What might be a stimulant is another narcotic. Their restlessness is merely played upon, to pass the time—played upon and just enough, from day to day, appeased. Meanwhile the time does pass.

One would think of Wisconsin as the ideal

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state to live in, a paragon of civic success, but for the fact that the young people dream only of getting away. And there are already a fair number of Middle-Westerners about the world; a sort of vagrant chosen race like the Jews. It is our better luck to leave behind in our Palestine a teeming, prospering family, to fall back on in case of disaster and to save us, meanwhile, from the nervousness of vagabonds who really have no native land left. But we are more than likely to call New York, that palace-hotel, home; the midland gets little glory and even less entertainment from our activities. A great maternal source of, among other things, ability and brutal ardor and ingenuity and imagination—scarcely revisited, abandoned, almost unable to profit by its fruitfulness in men.

Upon these renegade children, voluntary exiles, adventurers and emigrants, brothers, cousins, or acquaintances—the others, those who have not yet taken flight, even those who never will, speculate a great deal in their own

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interest. They envy our apparent moral emancipation, our pocket money literal and otherwise, the gaiety which, if nothing more, we bring home to show them. They dread risks we seem to have run, suspect abnormalities which may have abetted us. What they admire most is our good luck; we are the favorites of chance, goddess whose mythology the films have spun. They ask question after question and prefer not to take advice. Most of them will remain what they are, where they are—reality only a little poisoned by notions of themselves freed and perfected, of pleasanter societies and facile foreign cities.

For those who dare not go east to meet the future, there is the hope that it may little by little be coming to them. Dreading isolation, most of them keep in line in spite of any eagerness; they do regret that the Middle West is so slow to change, but there is no comfort in anything unless all act together. That Basque *beret* at which the two workmen in the train stared—my brother asks me

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not to wear it in the street; but having seen in a New York magazine widely circulated out here a recommendation of such headgear, I can assure him that he will have to buy one for himself presently. The same law applies to manners and morals. The peculiar juvenile debauchery which in the East resulted from prohibition, that very Western law, has already crept westward; aided by drink, certain young married sets have begun to make the simplest experiments in immorality; every irregular problem ever thought of may well be on its way.

By birth the best of these young people are Protestants of some sort; by accident, or thanks to their own efforts, the classic Protestant rules have given way to an almost equally scrupulous open-mindedness. The doctrine of their elders imposes on them a certain lack of candor; they are wonderfully adroit; the danger is that in an admirable maze of diplomacy, discretion, and amiability they may lose track of their impulses.

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They are eminently reasonable, and wish neither to be hampered by old nonsense laid down as law nor to be exposed to the least persecution, but to be informed about the consequences of daring which is greater than their own; so that when the time comes they need not court disaster in the way that others have done. Individually they have few fundamental prejudices; the intolerance of Western society as a whole now seems to rest upon > timidity about talking to each other. Their heresies are all hypothetical and they are in a certain sense courtiers, perfectly willing to compromise, to manoeuvre, to turn about as the wind blows, and meanwhile to do the greater part of their experimenting in imagination or vicariously.

Hence their enthusiastic appetite for a certain type of very rare fiction in which, in so far as the author has them, the keys to personal liberty, the ledgers of genuine revolutions, shall be given. A literature of fresh convictions and agility in avoiding sorrow, of

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caprice, intoxications, and tenderness without shame; offering—to the new generation on stock-farms, in suburbs and sleepy colleges—the advantages of travel, the advantages of recklessness at a distance and vicarious trial flights; unexpurgated reports from the laboratories in which the future of conduct, their conduct, is being experimented upon; some tart breath of the sumptuous though menaced time to come; some sort of *Chanson de Geste* to provoke and ravish this imaginative soldiery to violent effort, to an intelligent looting of liberties, to a final ripe and amused peace. . . . They do ask for a certain cheerfulness; one cannot expect those who seek the future in literature to wish to be altogether discouraged. I have not hitherto believed that the search for the future in literature often leads to good literature; be that as it may. No more weather-bound farmers, they beg; no more of the inarticulate, no more love limited to unfortunate stables and desperation growing faint between rows of

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spoiled corn, no more poverty-stricken purity, no more jeering or complaining about lamentable small towns. . . . They or their fathers have had enough of all this. Who can blame them?

I at least do not, as in my mother's spare room I try to put in final order the manuscript of the book of which this diary, this stock-taking, is to form a part, and which scarcely seems inspiring or prophetic. It is no eagle for these ambitious, often heavy-hearted Ganymedes. Nor can it be very instructive: how could I expect natives of Wisconsin to see in the first story in the collection or the last my comment on, let us say, their flight or desire to fly to such questionable utopias as New York and Montparnasse?

It does represent, the whole collection, be it Wisconsin's fault or my own, a strangely limited moral order. Drunkenness; old or young initiations into love; homesickness in one's father's home for one's own, wherever .

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it may be, or the more usual sort with its attendant disappointment; the fear of God; more drunkenness. Roads and piazzas and lawns (always out of the corner of one's eye the haunting landscape, the haunted sky, the brindled fields, the four seasons with their over-ornate weather) small houses and small towns and other tiresome roads. That is all there is to it. And set beside a complicatedly unfolding reality, it seems little or not enough: too formal, as one's view of something which in one's childhood one did not expect to see change; now too squalid and now too noble; painted with too rudimentary a rainbow.

Then, with a sense of an immortal task and a mortal weariness, it comes time to return to New York, which is halfway back to the south of France. How much sweeter to come and go than to stay; that by way of judgment upon Wisconsin. The dark red railway station reminds me of Germany, the dim country into which the polished tracks

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lead away, of Russia—that is, of a place I have never seen. The orchards on the horizon look like black crêpe; there is a little lacquer sunset; useless and uselessly somber things, vainglory of God. Just as a child finds omens all about, I feel glad that I have never written a line for which there is any earthly use. Above the sunset the evening star blazes away superfluously, Mars or Venus in a sky composed of frost—though there is fighting only once a lifetime and, I suppose, less love-making than anywhere else in the world . . .

The train scarcely leaves the dim roofs and yellow windows behind before I feel my imagination beginning to be drawn away elsewhere, to several places irrelevant to each other at once; it is as if half the world were made of magnets. I fight against these charms and suspiciously close Gide's *Les Nourritures Terrestres*, which I had begun to read; my life of the rest of the year will get under way all too soon. Two young

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women across the aisle try to discover what my book is; theirs is a novel about Helen of Troy. They are workingwomen; I know because I hear them talking about a raise of their wages; but they are as arrogant and delicate as if they were kept. At present the West is a women's world; their bright minds make up its heart. But men's hearts suffer, in 1927, a strangely intellectual ferment. . .

I change trains, and throbbing on the rails the engine climbs up toward the town called Marblehead, which starts the same train of thought as before. It is the Greeks and Romans and the traditions preserved in Europe by the translators of Plutarch and by Montaigne and Goethe which, if one is an American, exasperate the imagination. Traditions of the conduct of life with death in mind. . . Few Americans are reasonable enough even to demand of seventy years their entire sweetness; the fame of too few will outlast, anywhere except in heaven, their mortal bodies. For various reasons we are, in 1927,

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the dominant nation in the world; there are, nevertheless, in 1927, more Frenchmen than Americans whose lives are to be memorable. (For Lindbergh and Isadora Duncan God be praised. . .) But I believe that American youngsters are equal in force, elasticity, beauty, and other natural gifts to the Greeks. In the fourth university year, let us say; not much longer. Something happens to them; the flower turns out to be seedless. Now all the causes, the mysterious stamens, are undergoing subtle transformations, perhaps for the better, perhaps not. It is a grave situation; and I believe that in the near future descriptive writing about average American destinies must inevitably be that of a reporter, an analyst, a diagnostician.

What may be called honest portrayal of a period of transition, of spiritual circumstances changing for an entire race, requires a fastidious realism, minute notation of events in their exact order, and the special sobriety of doctors or of witnesses at a trial.

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The more such an author has in common with his characters the better; typical trivialities surpass in significance the noblest feelings; an immediate report is more valuable than reminiscences. The rest is lyricism: the hero's shameless ode in praise of his own fortune or, even in the great, dim, half-attentive courtyard of the Mississippi Valley, a sort of serenade . . .

- 7 For fiction may combine in various proportions poetry and journalism. Poetry dispenses with chronology; it offers object or emotion as an end in itself during one moment which is assumed to be eternal, or under conditions as unfluctuating as those of the golden age; it must have some sort of immutability as a foundation. So I decide that the novelist who is or wishes to be anything of a poet will avoid such problems as, for example, Wisconsin is now likely to suggest; and will try to contribute to the appetites which make themselves felt there rather than to portray the confusion in which they

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arise. And no judicious novelist, however prosaic, will strive to outdistance life; he will choose problems which only seem insoluble, which in some corner of society, on some small illustrative scale, have been solved. The future of American civilization is a genuine riddle. The riddle of a sphinx with the perfect face of a movie star, with a dead-leaf complexion which is the result of this climate, our heating system, our habits . . .

Over many little bridges the train makes a soft thunder. A piece of moon has come up. In front of it a grove of naked trees, a flat expanse of dreary silver tarnished by weed-tops thrusting through it, a broken-looking house, a town, a living but icy river, rapidly give place to each other; as in the foreground of a writer's attention possible subjects for a book vary and shift before that waxing, waning, one-sided radiance which is his own spirit and about which alone he has no choice.

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An English friend of mine once took to visit her father in the country a young American painter of some note. A year or two later he had an exhibition in Paris; she told the aging gentleman about it and asked if he remembered the American. "Ah yes, yes. That was the young man who didn't know where he was born. I thought it very curious."

"Now what made you think that, father? You misunderstood. He was born in the Middle West."

"But that's just it! I asked him, and that is precisely what he said—all he could tell me."

<< That, I believe, is a parable. A place which has no fixed boundaries, no particular history; inhabited by no one race; always exhausted by its rich output of food, men, and manufactured articles; loyal to none of its many creeds, prohibitions, fads, hypocrisies; now letting itself be governed, now ungovernable. . . . The Middle West is no-

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where; an abstract nowhere. However earnestly writers proud of being natives of it may endeavor to give it form and character, it remains out of focus, amorphous, and a mystery. And by attempting to be specific as in these notes of my visit I have done, one over-particularizes, inevitably. What seems local is national, what seems national is universal, what seems Middle-Western is in the commonest way human. And yet—there is the sluggish emotional atmosphere, the suavity of its tedium, the morbid grandeur of its meanest predicaments; or are these illusions of those who take flight, who return? There is no Middle West. It is a certain climate, a certain landscape; and beyond that, a state of mind of people born where they do not like to live. A certain landscape? All the landscapes, except the noblest: the desert, the alp, the giant seas. One of its climates, one of its anarchic aspects clings to every memory, and deforms or charges with excessive lyricism

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the plain facts; so the winter, dazzling and boring as it is, has brooded too much over this account. There are other aspects, other seasons. In recent years I have not been at home except in midwinter or midsummer; next time I shall try to come in the fall . . .

A season which cannot be nationalized; wherever there are carts of gathered food, rumpled skirts, laborers, there is Breughel. Overhead, the gray and blue of the iris of an eye, a calm clear gaze now animated by sensitive winds, now short-sighted with rain-drops. The season of the eye, of supreme decoration: maroon with gun-metal, canary-yellow with silver, mahogany with pewter. About sundown farm-hands sing—what matter whose songs? The five senses saying good-bye; a whisper in the girls' ears, "Next summer we'll do it again." Out of the rags of husk comes the necessary corn; the hands, hard and flushed, wear beaks of steel for this work. Tobacco, butternuts, apples, and bitter grapes—the mouth is keen because it is

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getting cold. Harvest is the second or third oldest human contentment. It is never great enough, fortunately. Perennial disappointment to keep hope alive; so one is carried on from year to year. The last sunshine of every year is as bright as a wasp.

Perhaps I should enjoy myself more in the spring. There can be no disappointment then, for one expects nothing but promises and illusions. Sorrow is merely desire and all the joy promiscuous. Hepaticas under the rags of snow, blood-root, arbutus, and deadly nightshade, violets, mandrake, famished-looking lilies, iris, and cinnamon roses. Fruit trees: first, bony branches with negro skin and in due time their metamorphosis—angels' flesh, soft, mauve, milky, scented, roseate. In the sky other multiple branches, trailing vines, and wet sunken shadows: a colorless Everglades of cloud. The grass is like a sponge dipped in vinegar and perfume. Persian lilacs lay wreaths on the girls' shoulders as they pass in the lanes. Even the

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funerals are ragged with wild garlands; even the dead marry the ground; even the weddings sparkle with tears of rain. Rainbows and a profusion of birds. A wedding profusion of strange flowers, from the breast to the thighs of Wisconsin a rain of bouquet. . .

I realize that there are also mediocrities and spavined horses and tuberculous men, misery and streaks of madness, just as there were on the last farms before automobiles and electricity; but my mind leaves them out. One thing is certain: Wisconsin is no longer a wilderness. But I now know that a garden is better than any wilderness. Men and women have human stature in it and feel a greater number of satisfactions and disappointments; there is less cruelty, less involuntary cruelty at least.

I should like to write a book about ideal people under ideal circumstances. No sort of under-nourishment, no under-education, nothing partial or frustrated, no need of variety or luxury—in short, no lack of any-

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thing which, according to its children, Wisconsin denies. Only the inavertible troubles, all in the spirit, and only those characteristic of a period in which, here and there, certain bans have been lifted, certain jealousies appeased. The ease of mature and healthy plants in a well-kept garden, but an indoor book, in which human beings alone, not the weather or swamps or the beasts of the field, shall have parts to play. I am content that it shall pass for tragedy; even the arias of Mozart, the love-making of Daphnis and Chloe, hurt. And when that is done, I shall have to ask myself whether, like Emerson and Whitman, I lack the vision of evil . . .

A little Italian brakeman, hurrying through the train, shouts, "Milwau-kee! Milwau-kee!" giving back to the syllables their red-Indian sound. I have some time before a train goes on to Chicago and climb up into the little park beside the station. Snowy bluffs over the fresh-water sea. On the other side of the real sea I shall miss this

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exciting air, which is to make a new race of us if nothing else does. Indeed it is melancholy leaving this land in which democracy is coming to a climax, in which a whole uneven generation is beginning to claim as its right, not merely the rewards, but the powers of supermen. The moonlight is brilliant because the windows of the thick-set Germanic buildings are not too close, because of the ice drifting on the water or attached to the shore. The bluish stars have horns. There are no boats in the harbor.

Then, wishing like Gide in his youth "to have been born in a time when, to celebrate
< all things, the poet had only to enumerate them," I remember the ports which seem to me more beautiful than this: the Hudson River whose lowing steamships send into your sleep flocks of great marine cattle; the Pool of London, a hollow and perhaps criminal cave under the fog of amber; the port of Marseilles shaped like a drinking bowl, wreathed with nets and rigging, and giving

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off an odor of poison in spite of the dates, sea-chestnuts, sea-potatoes, lemons and olives; the bay of Naples over which, on roofs, balconies, and perilous streets like tree-branches, figures out of the *comedia del arte*, beaked, ragged, clear-eyed as birds, gesticulate and play evil tricks and sing; and the roadstead of Villefranche. The latter lies in a broken ring of dim olive-trees; and between the lemon-white quay and the battleships, sailors signal to each other with an alphabet of outstretched arms and small flags like handkerchiefs on sticks, their faces gone blank with concentration. For another book I should like to learn to write in a style like those gestures: without slang, with precise equivalents instead of idioms, a style of rapid grace for the eye rather than sonority for the ear, in accordance with the ebb and flow of sensation rather than with intellectual habits, and out of which myself, with my origins and my prejudices and my Wisconsin, will seem to have disappeared.